

THE FREEDOM CONVOY

THE INSIDE STORY OF THREE WEEKS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD



Andrew Lawton

CHAPTER 1

THE MAKINGS OF A CONVOY

Brigitte Belton had crossed the Canada-United States border more times than she could count. On November 16, 2021, it was different. A run-in with an overzealous border guard would push her to the breaking point.

The 52-year-old trucker from Wallaceburg, Ontario, was driving into Canada with a load and no one else in the truck, just her dog. The Canada Border Services Agency officer at the Windsor-Detroit crossing threatened her with arrest. Her crime? Talking to the officer in the wicket without a mask. Belton wasn't trying to be obstinate. She's asthmatic and is a domestic violence survivor. She says having her face covered sends her "off into the deep end." Usually when she'd crossed the border, the agents were understanding. Sometimes she was allowed to wear a plastic face shield instead, which didn't cause her the same grief as a mask. This time, there was no such compassion.

Belton was sent into the secondary screening area and warned again that she could be arrested by Windsor police for not complying. After a conversation with a supervisor, she was released with a warning, but the experience rattled her. So much so that she nearly

The Freedom Convoy

got into an accident—something she said had never happened in her seven years of driving truck. A couple of hours later, she pulled into the Husky truck stop near London, just off Highway 401, and recounted the incident in a teary TikTok video.

“In Canada, we’re no longer free,” Belton said in the video. “I’m done. I’m done. I don’t know what I’m going to do next, but I’m done.”⁴

It wasn’t just about the border incident, but nearly two years of lockdowns, restrictions, and mandates that made Belton, who never got vaccinated against COVID-19, feel like a second-class citizen in her own country. She thought of ending her life. She even tried to move her bank accounts to her husband’s name, but this plan was thwarted when she learned she had to go into a bank branch in person during business hours to do it. In the meantime, people who saw her video reached out to console her. Belton also spoke with her husband, who was able to calm her down.

Since September, the unvaccinated were barred from going to restaurants, gyms and most recreational venues in Ontario. All provinces ended up imposing vaccine passport regimes, even the conservative holdouts of Alberta and Saskatchewan. In October, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau implemented a sweeping vaccine mandate for air and rail travel, as well as for federal public servants. By the time of Belton’s run-in with the CBSA officer, her truck felt like her only respite from a world that was closing off to her.

“At that point I was done,” she told me. “I was done with life. I knew I couldn’t live in Canada in an open-air jail. I just couldn’t.”

Little did Belton know, things were about to get worse.

On November 19, two days after Belton’s mask altercation, the Canadian government imposed a *de facto* vaccine mandate for cross-border truckers.⁵ Belton was about to lose her livelihood.

The Makings of a Convoy

The vaccine mandate for truckers didn't add to Belton's despair, oddly. Instead of giving up on Canada, she had an idea. In her TikTok scrolling, she had come across another Canadian trucker who, like her, had clearly had enough of the COVID era—BigRed1975.

In real life, BigRed is Chris Barber, a Saskatchewan trucker and prolific TikTok influencer with a large following. Belton had never met him, but liked the way he discussed COVID restrictions and felt they were on the same wavelength politically. Like her, she thought he was at his breaking point. On one of his videos about the trucker vaccine mandate, she left a comment with a simple message: "Convoy 2022." When he didn't respond, she posted about the idea of doing a convoy on another video. And another. And another. ("I'm kind of a pushy little girl," she admitted). She kept going until she got his attention, then convinced him to talk on the phone so she could pitch her idea.

"Let's just get a group of people together. We'll drive around, we'll make some noise, we'll do some slow rolls, and honestly, this is going to be solved in 24 hours," Belton said to Barber in early December.

Belton's vision was to have simultaneous trucker convoys in cities and at border crossings across Canada tying up traffic so no one could look away. Another idea was a national trucker work stoppage, though she and Barber both preferred the convoy. Naively, she thought the government would cave in less than a day. After planting the seed with Barber, she kept nudging him along, putting her network marketing background to use persuading him to use his contacts and audience to help make it happen. She convinced him, and the Convoy to End Mandates—as it was then called—was born.

The Freedom Convoy

Interest in the convoy spread quickly across TikTok and Facebook. There was a momentary victory when Canada Border Services Agency said on January 12—three days before the trucker mandate was supposed to go into effect—it would continue allowing unvaccinated American and Canadian truckers into the country as it had before.¹⁰ Those gearing up for the convoy thought Trudeau was already buckling, although the victory was short-lived. The government reversed course the next afternoon, saying truckers would still have to be vaccinated effective January 15, dismissing the earlier about face as an “error” from the CBSA.¹¹ Even in the brief period when they thought the mandate was gone, Barber and Belton forged ahead with their convoy planning, knowing that their cause was much larger than just the trucker mandate.

“It’s not just for us,” Belton said in a January 15 video. “It’s for EMS. It’s for police. It’s for fire. It’s for moms. It’s for dads. It’s for everyone.”¹²

Belton whipped up a flyer to share the details on social media, and soon after others joined to lead convoys in different regions. She was going to spearhead a Sarnia segment while Barber rallied trucks in Saskatchewan. Other regional leaders stepped forward in Calgary, Winnipeg, and Windsor early on, too. The wheels were in motion, so to speak.

* * *

On August 29, 2021, a few dozen truckers blocked a highway on Australia’s Gold Coast for several hours to protest mandatory vaccination for essential workers.¹³ Afterwards, they set their sights on the capital of Canberra in New South Wales. Alberta activist James

The Makings of a Convoy

Bauder saw this and envisioned a Canadian version. He put out a call on Facebook for 500 trucks to drive to Ottawa with him seeking an end to vaccine passports, mask mandates, and lockdowns.

“If you have a Semi Truck and are willing to Step Up to save our Great Nation from becoming Chinada text me,” he wrote. “I am ready to make some noise but I need you Big Trucker.”¹⁴

The idea had been tried before. In February 2019, 170 trucks left Red Deer, Alberta in a convoy to Ottawa protesting the Trudeau government’s energy policies. The drivers and other demonstrators held two days of rallies in Ottawa, attracting fairly mainstream conservative support, including a speech by then-Conservative Party of Canada leader Andrew Scheer. A GoFundMe campaign for United We Roll raised \$142,873. Organizers trumpeted their success and everyone returned home without issue.¹⁵

Bauder was there for United We Roll, and thought COVID would make an even better backdrop. During the pandemic, he founded Canada Unity, a purportedly “humanitarian” Facebook page and online network which posts anti-vaccine mandate and anti-vaccine content. A December 30, 2021 post called vaccine-related injuries a “genocide” and suggested it was unsafe to travel on a plane flown by a vaccinated pilot.¹⁶ One of Canada Unity’s campaigns was collecting signatures for a so-called memorandum of understanding (MOU), a six-page document bizarrely directed at the Canadian Senate and Governor General Mary Simon. The MOU claims to create a “Citizens of Canada Committee” between signatories, senators, and the Queen’s representative in Canada, which would be empowered to order provincial, municipal and federal governments to drop vaccine mandates and vaccine passports. The MOU is nonsense couched in legalese, but this can be convincing for those who don’t know better,

especially given the confidence (and relentlessness) with which Bauder has promoted it.

Over the fall of 2021, Bauder ginned up support for his convoy idea and the MOU, and in December drove from Alberta to Ottawa in “Unity 1,” a camper decked out in Canada Unity insignia, to deliver the MOU to the Senate of Canada in person, a mission he dubbed Operation Bearhug. He only found one 18-wheeler willing to go to Ottawa—a far cry from the 500 he asked for—but he was able to assemble dozens of protesters when he got there. Bauder led a protest group to the Senate building where parliamentary precinct security guards told him they couldn’t accept any documents on site. Bauder improvised and led his group to a nearby Canada Post outlet, where he paid—unnecessarily, as letters to parliament and the Governor General don’t require postage—to send the MOU by registered mail. Bauder returned home, and Canada Unity promised “big developments” in 2022.

Belton had never heard of Bauder, Canada Unity, or the memorandum of understanding. As word travelled about the Convoy to End Mandates, Bauder contacted Belton through a women-in-trucking group and offered to join forces. On a call in early January, Bauder sold Barber and Belton on the idea of going to Ottawa instead of arranging simultaneous regional convoys. He thought the key to ending Covid restrictions and vaccine mandates was public pressure at the federal level. To promote the idea, Bauder looped in Pat King, a self-proclaimed “investigative journalist” with hundreds of thousands of Facebook followers. King announced the plan for an Ottawa convoy in a January 12 Facebook video.¹⁷

The next evening, King hosted a 71-minute Facebook live stream with Belton, Barber, Bauder and two of the fledgling convoy’s regional

The Makings of a Convoy

organizers, Dale Enns and Joe Janzen.¹⁸ At one point, 3,000 people tuned in. It was apparent during the discussion that Bauder had taken it upon himself to adopt a key planning role. He promoted his memorandum of understanding during the stream. He also shared—to Belton's surprise—that a third convoy route had been added from the Maritimes through Quebec, in addition to the Vancouver-Ottawa and Sarnia-Ottawa routes. He spoke about the importance of a day-by-day itinerary accounting for food, fuel, and lodging requirements. The west-to-east convoy would follow the United We Roll route from 2019. The plan was to flesh out the itinerary in the coming days, then post it to Canada Unity's website as a central reference point, which would also provide contact information for the various regional road captains. During the discussions, the venture also took on a new name: the Convoy to End Mandates became Freedom Convoy 2022.

and comments. Most were just words of encouragement, but others asked when the convoys were leaving, where they were meeting, and, increasingly, how they could financially support the project.

Neither Barber nor Belton had previously thought of money. Both were planning to pay their own way to Ottawa and assumed others would do the same. They were just excited a growing number of their fellow truckers and “four wheelers”—car and pickup drivers—wanted to do the same. That changed on January 13, when Barber got a call from Tamara Lich.

Lich was born Arlene Catherine Martineau on September 19, 1972 in rural Saskatchewan. She was given the name Tamara by her adoptive parents. Lich was an established activist in Medicine Hat, a southern Alberta city of 63,000. In 2018 and 2019, she spearheaded local yellow vest protests, a conservative movement that took its inspiration from protests in France for economic justice. She was also on the board of the Maverick Party, an upstart western independence party which had run a slate of candidates in the 2021 federal election. In 2019, Lich was a supporter of the United We Roll convoy, but didn't follow it to Ottawa. Apart from a family trip there when she was five years old, Lich had never been to the capital. Independent of Bauder, Barber, and Belton, Lich had thought Canada might be ripe for another convoy, so she immediately wanted in when she learned of their efforts.

Lich contacted Barber through a mutual acquaintance and offered to manage a crowdfunding campaign and social media page for the convoy, which at this point was being promoted by lots of people, but had no central hub for information. Barber and Belton were having trouble keeping up, especially while spending their days driving truck, so accepting the offer was a no-brainer. On January 14, Lich

created the Freedom Convoy 2022 Facebook page and a GoFundMe campaign.

“We are asking for donations to help with the costs of fuel, food, and lodgings to help ease the pressures of this arduous task,” the campaign’s fundraising pitch read. “It’s a small price to pay for our freedoms. We thank you all for your donations and know that you are helping reshape this once beautiful country back to the way it was.”

Lich expected to raise \$20,000 to buy some diesel and sandwiches for the truckers. She laughed at Barber when he suggested setting the fundraising target at \$250,000.

“Oh my God, I am not doing that,” she told him. “That sounds greedy. No way am I doing that. I’m going to set it for \$100,000, and I still feel bad about that.”

The campaign hit six figures in just two days.

With donations ranging from a few dollars to thousands of dollars, the GoFundMe brought in hundreds of thousands of dollars in its first few days. Within a week, it reached \$1 million, and the trucks hadn’t even hit the road. There was no plan for that amount of money, let alone what came next.

Because Lich’s name was on the GoFundMe and she was posting regular video updates on the Freedom Convoy 2022 Facebook page, she quickly became the most visible leader of this grassroots movement. The money was the most tangible way of measuring the convoy’s momentum, although the campaign’s growth invited questions about how that sum was going to be spent. The plan was always to give it directly to truckers to pay for fuel first, then food and lodging if necessary. Any leftover funds would be donated to a veterans’ organization. Lich updated the GoFundMe description to explain that she would disburse the money through e-transfers,